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SENSITIVE
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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TIMOR-LESTE: LOCAL ELECTIONS FREE, FAIR, AND ALMOST WITHOUT INCIDENT

11. (SBU) Summary: Despite the recent history of violence and instability associated with Timorese elections, the October 9 elections for Suco Chiefs and Councils in 442 localities throughout the country were conducted in an orderly fashion with only a few minor, isolated incidents reported. International and domestic observers judged the elections to be largely free and fair. With the burden of managing the elections having shifted away from the international community in favor of Timorese authorities, the successful conduct of these elections is an encouraging indication of the country's political development. The Sucos lack real political power, but they are still expected to play a significant role in forming a grassroots network for the political parties as they prepare for upcoming elections. Because the new Suco election laws prohibited candidates from declaring any party affiliation, it is difficult to judge the results, but early indications suggest no major shift in the popularity of the national parties. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Timorese went to the election polls on October 9 to choose their local leaders and councils in the countries 442 localities. Despite the fact that Suco Chiefs and Suco Councils lack real political authority in Timor-Leste, popular enthusiasm for the democratic process remains high and voter turnout was reported at 68 percent of eligible voters by election officials (Note: A number of candidates ran unopposed, possibly leading to a reduction in the overall turnout figures). Only a few minor incidents and irregularities were reported. In one locality in the Viqueque district, for example, the ballots were incorrectly prepared and the election was postponed until October 15. Police were forced to restore order when voters carrying expired voter cards objected to being turned away at another polling station. A National Election Commission representative was called in to another polling station to calm tempers that flared as a result of a close, contentious vote.

13. (SBU) The international community, and specifically the United Nations, has shouldered much of the burden of organizing and conducting elections in Timor-Leste since 1999. The Special Representative of the Secretary General Atul Khare told the Ambassador, however, that the Timorese authorities had assumed about 60 percent of that responsibility themselves in these elections. Similarly, another UN official remarked that while previous elections had required the use of over 40 UN helicopters to transport ballots and officials, the Timorese requested the use of only 8 helicopters for these elections. Given the complexity of organizing 442 separate ballots and elections in even the most remote and inaccessible corners of the country, the successful conduct of these most recent elections is an encouraging indication of the development of Timor-Leste's democratic institutions.

14. (SBU) The National Election Commission is currently tabulating the voting and is expected to send its provisional results to the Council of Appeals for approval by the end of this week. The fact that the Suco Chiefs and Councils lack real political authority minimizes the potential impact that these elections results will have on the country's political situation. Nevertheless, the Sucos will likely play a significant role in forming a grassroots network for the political parties that hope to contest next year's municipal elections, as well as the 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections. The ban on political party affiliation for Suco election candidates makes it difficult to judge the results, but early indications suggest no major shift in the popularity of the national parties.

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